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Mr. Nixon's Fearful Men

The writer is editorial page editor of The Post. This is the first of two articles adapted form a speech before the Women's National Democratic Club.

Sen. George Aiken, who wisely advised us early in the Vietnam War to declare victory and come home, has a way of putting things. Of Henry Kissinger's tantrum in Salzburg, Austria, he had this to say: "The goddam fool, can't he take it—why that's part of the business, being criticized."

Can't he take it? This is not just a question to be raised about Dr. Kissinger, who can probably take it somewhat better than most of his former colleagues in what might be called the first Nixon administration. Nevertheless, it is a question appropriate to his Salzburg performance if only because an inability to "take it" has been perhaps the predominate collective characteristic, to one degree or another, of all of the so-called President's men, in large part because it is a characteristic that is transmitted, so to say, by the President himself. In fact, a good case can be made that this particular frailty, as much as any other, accounts in large measure for the illegalities and improprieties and just plain excesses that, taken together, have given us the misnomer, Watergate.

It is fashionable in some quarters, of course, to look upon the Nixon crowd as tough, rough, ruthless—and bold. And so they may act or even sometimes have been. But it seems to me this has always been peculiarly an administration of insecure and fearful men—fearful of demonstrators, fearful of dissent, fearful of security breaches, fearful of running for office by the traditional rules of the game. They do not seem to have the courage or the confidence somehow to deal in conventional ways with all the things that other administrations have somehow managed to handle without resorting to dirty tricks.

One remembers John Mitchell likening an anti-war protest group surrounding his Justice Department to the Russian Revolution. One senses even the expletives deleted and the bullyboy bluster encountered throughout the President's transcripts convey a fearfulness filtering down from the very top. Hence the enemies list and the strongarm approach to campaign financing and the abortive Houston plan. Hence also the Houston Plan's direct descendant, the "plumbers" unit, to investigate, outside of the government's duly constituted security system, the private lives of private citizens.

With an appreciation of this strange sense of inadequacy to deal with harsh realities, starting at the top and permeating every aspect of government, one can perhaps better understand some part of the reason that the Secretary of State stamped his foot in Salzburg early last week and threatened to resign if people wouldn't leave him alone. Given the squalor that surrounds him—and in the absence of any visible reinforcement by his President—one can even understand his torturous resort to the litany of "leaks" and "innuendo," of "the media" conspiring with "anonymous" antagonists to rob him of his public honor and, by implication, to confound the conduct of foreign policy.

One can understand it—without admiring it. For it is not exactly what we have become accustomed to over the last quarter century from our Secretaries of State or from our government. Other administrations of both parties have made their way through the Berlin Blockade and Quemoy and Matsu and Korea and war in the Mideast and the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietman, and suffered badly at the hands of the press and the political opposition. And they have soldiered through all this without feeling the need for a secret, extra-legal White House para-police unit to practice burglary or conduct electronic surveillance directed against newsmen and former government officials, or to defame a defendant in a criminal proceeding brought by the government.

Other administrations have also made what we now call "conceptual breakthroughs" in diplomacy, with the Marshall Plan, and NATO and the earlier arms control agreements and all the rest without feeling the need to celebrate them with television extravaganzas and triumphant global processionals—without anything like the accompanying PR, as we say, of an intensity that seems to be essential to Mr. Nixon's conduct of foreign policy.

And other Secretaries of State have had their bad moments—and borne them with fortitude. Can we imagine Secretary of State George Catlett Marshall having a public tantrum and threatening to resign unless Sen. Joseph McCarthy stopped calling him a Communist?

Does nobody remember the "innuendo" directed at Dean Acheson by none other than Richard Nixon in shabby references to the "Truman, Acheson, Hiss foreign policy"?

Surely there was an equal measure of venom in the opposition to John Foster Dulles' "brinksmanship," or to Dean Rusk's dogged efforts to rally support for "genocide" in Vietnam. Is Henry Kissinger really suffering anything worse today?

Perhaps—but not at the hands of political opponents or of the press or of some mysterious and undefinable sinister force. What is undermining and confounding his conduct of foreign policy is the utter failure of the President to deal with Watergate in a way which offers any hope of putting the matter to rest. The consequences of this are self-evident and they are not limited to the doubts and uncertainties about American leadership implanted at home and abroad by the impeachment process, though these are serious enough. Rather, they extend to the deformation and perversion of our political processes, which encourage even such a man as Dr. Kissinger to join the chorus against the political opposition, the media, the *enemies* as the sources of all or troubles, when the real source, the center of responsibility for what has befallen us, is none other than the President himself.

Dr. Kissinger's predicament perfectly illustrates the point. Frankly, I am more persuaded by the evidence in Dr. Kissinger's favor in the controversy now enveloping him, than the evidence that has been presented against him. I do not doubt that at the least he yielded to presidential pressure and consented to cooperate with what has been described as a specific program of wiretaps of his own staff. But whether this should disqualify him from being Secretary of State depends in large measure on just what it was Kissinger consented to, to what extent it was later expanded and debased without his knowledge or approval by others in the entourage in which he worked, and whether he lied about it under oath. For those answers we should await the judgment of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the meantime, what is interesting, and particularly dispiriting about this controversy is that it should be a controversy at all. For there is one man, or so it would seem, who could resolve the matter in short order and that man, of course, is the President. Instead, the President says next to nothing—merely that Dr. Kissinger's honor needs no defense from him. So we are left to speculate about Dr. Kissinger's integrity. We are left with a Secretary of State in Austria threatening petulantly to resign if the public questioning of his honor does not stop forthwith. Nothing could better demonstrate the corrosive impact of impeachment upon the conduct of American foreign policy. And nothing could better illustrate the deformation of our processes at the hands of Watergate.